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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001096

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SUBJECT: STRESS FRACTURES WITHIN TURKEY'S RULING PARTY

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Classified By: Political Counselor Janice Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),(d)

11. (C) Summary and comment. The closure case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) complicates PM Erdogan's challenge of holding together his big tent party. Under the strain of a possible closure, differences among the traditional AKP factions - National View (Milli Gorus), liberal conservatives, nationalists and pro-Southeast members - have become more apparent, as alliances shift over strategies for party survival. The lack of viable alternatives and Erdogan's charisma are the glue that binds, but it has weakened with the closure case and centralization of power within AKP. Abdullah Gul's move to the presidency, former Speaker Bulent Arinc's demotion and Abdullatif Sener's sidelining have centralized power in Erdogan's hands. Erdogan's influence will continue to loom large even if the AKP is closed and he is banned, but the debate over who should fill his shoes as party leader and prime minister may produce an heir apparent -- now lacking -- and restore balance to a party that has become a one-man show. End summary and comment.

Lonely at the Top

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12. (C) AKP's profile has shifted since coming to power in 12002. Still a big tent party with four main factions, in AKP's second term power has concentrated in PM Erdogan's hands. The Erdogan-driven party reorganization prior to July 2007 elections, putting his personal stamp on the candidate list, gave AKP a more centrist face, sidelined the pious Milli Gorus and nationalist wings, alienated some old friends and shifted power centers, but left the factions intact. The initial triumvirate of Erdogan, Gul and Arinc disbanded, leaving Erdogan calling the shots, to the frustration of some AKPers exasperated with his often superficial consultation and tight control over decision-making. His hold on the party remains strong; new MPs and many previously elected deputies are beholden to him. Most genuinely respect and admire him. He has shrewdly massaged key interests of each main group: his efforts to lift the headscarf ban satisfied religious Milli Gorus supporters; his renewed EU-related reform focus encouraged liberal conservatives; a \$12 million development plan for the GAP project restored hope to pro-Southeast members; and constructive coordination with the military against the terrorist PKK pleased nationalist-leaning AKPers.

13. (C) Mounting pressure from the closure case and the Constitutional Court's June 5 annulment of constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban are taking their toll on Erdogan. AKP members are furiously debating options, with

various groups promoting different approaches on how to proceed. Jurists within the party pushed hard for constitutional amendments to limit party closures, a course Erdogan eventually rejected as appearing self-serving. Pragmatists like AKP Vice Chair Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat prevailed over members who did not want to respond to the closure case indictment as a legitimate legal proceeding. Liberal conservatives such as Justice Commission Chair Ahmet Iyimaya and Yasar Yakis contend AKP should never have pursued constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban. Regular party meetings, including weekend retreats where MPs raise issues directly with Erdogan and his ministers, allow members to vent, feel they have been consulted and internalize the party line. As AKP Ankara insider Orhan Kaya explained, the most important aspect of the retreats occurs behind closed doors: disgruntled members are surrounded by powerful MPs and pressured or sweet-talked back into line, sometimes through secret bargaining. "People with influence over them are used to silence them or party leaders meet some of their demands to regain their hearts," Kaya said.

#### Open Debate; One Decision-Maker

14. (C) Calls for early elections, by-elections, forming a new party, combining with an existing party, compromising, and taking a more aggressive stance are all on the table. Choosing the course rests with Erdogan, who is working hard to project a business-as-usual image. According to AKP Diyarbakir MP Abdurrahman Kurt, party members are uneasy about the closure case but believe in Erdogan. He rallies flagging spirits with pep talks such as his recent remarks to

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his parliamentary group: "We have witnessed often that during our most difficult times, when we were challenged by shadows, the sun always comes out." AKP's decision to postpone parliament's summer recess until the closure case ruling is announced demonstrates Erdogan's determination to maintain a functioning government and parliament in the face of the judicial challenge. It also keeps MPs available and under control. Erdogan's public line has been to wait calmly for the court's decision. Contrary to press reports, AKP Kahramanmaraş MP Mehmet Saglam told us Erdogan reassured jittery deputies at a June 10 closed party meeting that A, B and C plans for responding to closure are in the works. He stressed, however, that the party should avoid public discussion of possible outcomes and remain focused on moving AKP's agenda forward. "We will continue the process together with the nation; we will walk together on this road," he stated, adding, "This is the train of the nation. Those who climb down cannot get back on it again."

15. (C) Erdogan's warning to MPs may be a sign the closure case and headscarf decision are creating stress fractures that threaten party solidarity. Internal horse-trading and fluid, issue-specific alliances are a trademark of AKP's traditional unity, and Erdogan continues to meet with MPs to hear their views. While many expect the party will hold together to form a new "AKP2" even if Erdogan and other leaders are banned, some predict a split. AKP member Kaya does not foresee such an outcome, but expects a small number of AKPers will move to other parties if AKP is dissolved. Kaya admits that groups within the party are pulling apart slightly under the current pressure, especially over the question of who would serve as prime minister if Erdogan is banned from party politics. "That's where the problem is - whether (the new leader) will be from Erdogan's or Gul's team," Kaya said. Echoing Kaya, former Motherland Party (ANAP/ANAVATAN) minister Mehmet Kececiler told us he expects AKP to remain united even if the party is closed. His colleague Halil Sivgin, an ANAVATAN insider with links to the military and government, predicts AKP will splinter into three groups if closed: Gul followers, Erdogan followers and others. If Erdogan is banned, the power to name his successor rests with Gul, but Gul's official withdrawal from politics to become president makes it harder for him to wield

influence within the party, except through proxies.

¶6. (C) Possible contenders to replace Erdogan as prime minister include FM Babacan and Interior Minister Atalay -- seen as Gul favorites -- and DPM Mehmet Ali Sahin, DPM Nazim Ekren and DPM Cemil Cicek from the Erdogan camp. Speaker Koksal Toptan, a middle-of-the-road candidate, is also a possibility, as is Forestry Minister Veysel Eroglu from the Milli Gorus wing, according to Kaya. Whoever it is will be party chairman as well as caretaker prime minister, Kaya added; he must be close to the people to carry the new party to an election victory. Abdullatif Sener, an AKP founder who declined to run last July, retains a grass-roots power base and could divide the party if he becomes an MP, Kaya said. Doubts about why Sener didn't run and recent statements that he will establish a new, centrist party if AKP is closed have reduced his influence somewhat, he added. While Sener is a hero to some, former ANAVATAN justice minister Oltan Sungurlu told us, others view him as a traitor. As Speaker, Toptan stepped into the spotlight twice recently, first calling for a "third way" solution that would fall short of party closure and avoid further instability, and more recently proposing a return to a bicameral parliament to address separation of powers concerns. Party leaders rejected his initiative, with Cicek flatly stating it is not on the agenda of the government or AKP. Toptan's invitation to party leaders to start a dialogue met with more success. If Erdogan puts off anointing a successor too long, it may make holding the party together more difficult. The most damaging thing is the uncertainty, according to Saglam.

¶7. (C) The best check on party defections is the lack of viable alternatives. "The factions don't really have options," Kaya said. "If they separate, they won't have the power they have now. Support for AKP may be declining but it is still high because of Erdogan, not the AKP." Adding to that is the sense AKP will benefit from the "victim" vote if elections are called, as it did last July. Some, such as Salih Kapusuz and Cemil Cicek, were quick to raise the early elections option to capitalize on the victim angle; they continue to project a strong, fighting stance that resonates

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well with grass-roots supporters. Justice Committee Chairman Iyimaya agreed closure would increase AKP's support, but added, "It would be good for the party but not good for democracy; large majorities are not always a victory."

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